

## ***Tactical Performance: The Theory and Practice of Serious Play* by L.M. Bogad**

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Larry Bogad's latest book, *Tactical Performance: The Theory and Practice of Serious Play*, takes readers to the front lines of contemporary activism, offering both a detailed critical analysis of the field, as well as practical guidance in how to construct effective action. Unlike his book *Electoral Guerrilla Theatre* (2005), which focused on performer-activists who have run for public office since the 1970s on deliberately playful and mischievous platforms, his latest offering draws heavily on case studies stemming from his extensive personal repertoire of tactical practice: he either helped found, wrote for, performed with, trained or advised (or some combination of these roles) many of the groups he discusses. This first-hand experience and knowledge has translated well, giving the book significant authoritative weight. This close involvement has also allowed Bogad to entertain readers with the kind of amusing observations and anecdotes that can only come from being an insider to events. So, as well as being scholarly, the book is also very funny and charismatic.

The principal chapters that make up *Tactical Performance* take readers inside specific tactical groups and their protest activities, such as the humorous 'clownfrontations' (p. 112) of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) at the G8 summit in Edinburgh in 2005, the police-evading/engaging strategies of Reclaim the Streets New York City, and the Oil Enforcement Agency (OEA), a climate change group that masquerades as a fictitious US federal body. These case studies are used to illuminate particular concepts and issues that are relevant to making effective actions. For instance, CIRCA, discussed in Chapter 2, is used to expand upon what he calls 'tactical carnival' (p.96) and how actions crafted in this mode might be planned, rehearsed and executed. Chapter 5's discussion of the OEA allows for an investigation of the tactical use of 'critical simulacra' (p. 211) – (drawing on Jean Baudrillard, Bogad defines this as 'a creative act that becomes its own reality', p. 228).

The book subsequently operates on multiple levels: as a monograph on contemporary activism, a catalogue of successful and unsuccessful tactics, and a practical guide and workbook for would-be activists. In this, it joins several recent *activist handbooks* aimed to support and encourage people in preparing effective actions, such as those by Aiden Ricketts (2012) and Randy Shaw (2013). In relation to theatre and performance specifically, Bogad's text provides a much-needed addition to the literature on activism,

which seems to have dwindled of late. It will join Jan Cohen-Cruz's anthology *Radical Street Performance* (1998), Baz Kershaw's *The Radical in Performance* (1999), and Bradford Martin's *The Theatre is in the Street* (2004) among others, as an inherently useful text that allows us to re-think effective strategies for engaging with the powerful. What makes Bogad's contribution to this lineage distinctive is his first-hand experience with the issues he raises.

Usefully, the case studies presented in each chapter are historically and critically contextualised by an introduction that lays out the field. The lineage Bogad provides begins with the civil rights movement sit-ins, and weaves through to include Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies, ACT-UP, Critical Art Ensemble, and the Zapatistas. In choosing this particular history, it is clear from the beginning that the focus is not on political theatres, but, specifically, activist organisations that have adopted theatrical techniques. Although this works, a greater acknowledgment of the radical theatre's role (beyond Augusto Boal) in cultivating aesthetic strategies to engage the public and the media since the 1960s would not have gone amiss. The critical terrain of *Tactical Performance* will be familiar to those who know the field: Mikhail Bakhtin, Baudrillard, Michele de Certeau, Guy Debord, and Herbert Marcuse are all here. There are few surprises in how these theorists are applied, but they are used well. A particular highlight for me was Bogad's careful reading of Bakhtin's carnivalesque in Chapters 1 and 2. Rather than emphasising the similarities between contemporary protest and Bakhtin's analysis of François Rabelais' literary depiction of medieval carnival images, as is the tradition in the field, Bogad focuses on their differences. Unlike the medieval carnival, the protest-cum-carnival of today is not always state-sanctioned and all-inclusive; it necessarily draws on 'a narrower, more specialised appeal than the all-community carnival of feudal times' (p. 99). Tactical artists today must be alert to that difference and understand the 'inherent performance-audience divide' (ibid.) which extends well beyond the event itself to include those watching remotely through television, laptop, and smartphone screens.

What are the key points to take away from *Tactical Performance*? There are many. In order to effectively combat major systems of power, which not only possess more resources but also have greater institutional memories (a point Bogad makes on several occasions), activists need to think and operate strategically to craft actions that avoid cliché and help attract positive attention to a cause. As well as a collective spirit and preparedness, irony, humour, mischief, and certain theatrical elements, such as masks and costumes, should be thought of as essential tools in a group's arsenal. While determining the efficacy of one's actions is notoriously difficult to do, Bogad is keen to stress that acknowledging small victories is vital (pp 62-4). Even if the performance has done little else than bring a protest group closer together, a small victory of sorts has been won. At the start of the final chapter,

Bogad compares effective resistance to water – ‘inexorably eroding, corroding, and carving’ (p. 280). One cannot expect to solve the world’s problems with a single performance, but with effective organisation, tactical preparedness, and the shared commitment of members of a group, over time their actions will slowly but not insignificantly change the shape of power’s terrain. The book could not be more timely. Readers will appreciate not only its sound practical guidance, but also its sense of humour.